March 10, 1957

Dear Bill,

My silence has lasted too long. There have been two main reasons. First, I have been writing in such a way that, when I come up for air around noon, it takes the rest of the day to get my breath back. I have been tormented by my inability to get my reading of the current crisis off the ground. Slowly, the realization dawned that I was trying to cram into an article something that could not be done in less than a small book. Anyway, once over my silly stile, I began to run and in a way I seldom do—without pausing to trim or polish, but just to get on. Of course, I do not know to what purpose I am running—I never do. But I must try to show why most of the argument about the crisis has seemed to me almost wholly beside the point. Actually, there is more than one point. But one of them has to do with the absence in the West for forty years of a sense of destiny. Power, yes, a sense of destiny, no—and this has found expression in a failure of will, to a large degree, of rational hope. Hence, too, by default Communism has been the only force in the world, felt as a force of destiny—its only real strength. This force is not only now corrupt; it is insanely preposterous. It is insane that Communism itself should have destroyed more Communists than all the other governments of the earth taken together; or that, by official record, the last three chiefs of the Soviet secret police should have been traitors to the revolution, intelligence agents of foreign powers all their active lives. And it is insane that the rest of the world could coexist with, and largely connive at, such insanity.

Perhaps for the consideration of all *NR*'s warring dialecticians, you should hang up Heraclitus' old hat: "No man can stand in the same river twice." Communism is no more free of the laws of dialectics than anything else is. The revolution is against the Revolution; that, I think, is the crevice that Burnham has been driving into, or groping toward. Does anybody doubt that there is a crevice? In March 1917, a crowd of eighty thousand swept into the Duma buildings and forced that wobbly assembly to end the thousand-year autocracy. "*Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras*," said a witty conservative minister, echoing a line of the *Marseillaise* that the crowd liked to sing. Let us not, in turn, be too witty. Crowds of 150-, 250-thousand, crammed the squares and streets before the Polish public buildings during the October days. Such a crowd is not in the first instance a menace. It is a notice: it says that official power is impotent in a profound way and is seeking a new center in the mass. Good God, don't you have any *revolutionists* among you ex-Communists? But, here I am, counseling again.

As always,
Whittaker

This letter has lain here, unmailed, a couple of days. How hard it is to write about the West and destiny. I know, I know—only the supremely difficult is worth trying to do. I have been working between two quotations

6. The day the Russian tanks moved on Budapest.

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Some months ago, Mr. Allen Dulles said words to this effect: "There seems no reason to suppose that the Russian mind is not the equal of the American mind." That of the mind which, within seventy years, produced the greatest intellectual and spiritual conflagration of the age, only partially fixed in the names: Pushkin, Gogol, Turgeniev, Dostoievski, Tolstoi, Soloviev, Chekhov, Bakunin, Mendeleyev, Moussorgski. Perhaps Bukharin's last words should hang in Mr. Dulles' office too —in the offices of both Mr. Dulleses.

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The first quotation is Do
destiny: "Science and re
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secondary and subordinate part in the life of nations; and so it will be till the end of time. Nations are built up and moved by another force which sways and dominates them, the origin of which is unknown and inexplicable: that force is the force of an insatiable desire to go on to the end, though, at the same time, it denies that there is an end. It is the force of the persistent assertion of one's existence, and a denial of death. It's the spirit of life, as the Scriptures call it, the 'river of living water,' the drying up of which is threatened in the Apocalypse." The other quotation is from Bukharin's last words to the court which condemned him to death. I do not understand how men, knowing that, in our own lifetime, another man spoke these words at such a moment, can read them and fail to be rent apart by their meanings.

Yet these words are scarcely known. I would print them bold and hang them at the front of college classrooms, not to be explained as a text, but to be seen often and quietly reflected on. Bukharin, it must be remembered, is literally innocent. He is guilty only of the logic of his position, the fact that, in the given historical juncture, the position which he held in theory, might, if pushed into the realm of practice, work against the revolution. It is his uncommitted crime that he pleads guilty to.

He said: "I shall now speak of myself, of the reasons for my repentance. . . . For when you ask yourself: 'If you must die, what are you dying for?'—an absolutely black vacuity suddenly rises before you with startling vividness. There was nothing to die for if one wanted to die unrepentant. . . . This, in the end, disarmed me completely and led me to bend my knees before the Party and the country. And when you ask yourself: 'Very well, suppose you do not die; suppose by some miracle you remain alive, again for what? Isolated from everybody, an enemy of the people, in an inhuman position, completely isolated from everything that constitutes the essence of life.' And at once the same reply arises. At such moments, Citizen Judges, everything personal, all personal incrustation, all rancor, pride and a number of other things, fall away, disappear. . . . I am about to finish.

continued

I AM perhaps speaking for the last time in my life." Is there not a stillness in the room where you read this? That is the passing of the wings of tragedy. I was never a follower of Nikolai Bukharin; I never admired him. About a month after he uttered those words, I broke with Communism. Some months ago, Mr. Allen Dulles said words to this effect: "There seems no reason to suppose that the Russian mind is not the equal of the American mind." That of the mind which, within seventy years, produced the greatest intellectual and spiritual conflagration of the age, only partially fixed in the names: Pushkin, Gogol, Turgeniev, Dostoievski, Tolstoi, Soloviev, Chekhov, Bakunin, Mendeleyev, Moussorgski. Perhaps Bukharin's last words should hang in Mr. Dulles' office too—in the offices of both Mr. Dulleses. Thus they might muse, during the coffee break, on just what degree of handicap, power without purpose sustains in the presence of a sense of destiny.